

4

Deconstructing Structure and Agency

The complex relationship between structure and agency is a perennial, if not intractable problem in modern social theory. The problem is reasonably simple to state, but not that easy to resolve. It is well captured by Marx, for example, when he prepares the ground to explain the causes and consequences of Louis Bonaparte's dictatorship in France during the 1850s: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past'. In his unusually punchy way, Marx suggests that whilst there are revolutionary moments when social agents decisively intervene in the historical process to bring about social change, 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living'. Indeed, just as human beings appear 'to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before' – in these 'periods of revolutionary crisis' – 'they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language' (Marx, 1997b, p. 329).

A more contemporary illustration of the problem of structure and agency is evident in our efforts to account for the global financial crisis, which erupted in 2008. Was this problem caused by the (irresponsible) actions of individual bankers, who developed and encouraged the use of complex financial instruments such as securitization to off load risky loans onto others? Or should our critical explanations focus on the changing structures of particular banking institutions, and the growing pressures to make quick and excessive profits, coupled with the lax regulatory regimes that did little to prevent the actions of

individual bankers? Might we focus more on the overall national and global (economic) environment within which banks and individual bankers operated? Or does any meaningful critical explanation involve particular combinations of structural and agential factors?

Each of these questions touches upon the problem of structure and agency, whilst meaningful answers seem to presuppose that we have a clear understanding of the concepts and their interconnection. A host of other social and political phenomena and dilemmas can easily be added to the list. This chapter begins by outlining the scope and variety of the problem of structure and agency in modern social theory and then elaborates four main perspectives that have sought to address the conceptual, methodological, and ethical aspects it raises. I take Louis Althusser's structural Marxism and Roy Bhaskar's critical realism to exemplify structure-centred accounts, whereas recent developments in rational choice theory and Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration are used to explore agency-centred perspectives. In describing and evaluating these perspectives, my aim is to deconstruct the underlying assumptions and claims of these approaches, thus preparing the ground for the elaboration of a poststructuralist alternative, which I shall put forward in Chapter 5.

Scope and variety

It comes as no surprise that the complicated relationship between structure and agency goes to the heart of much contemporary social and political theory. Encapsulated by Marx's neat dictum, the problem of linking human agents to social and natural structures poses difficult questions in philosophy, cultural theory, and ordinary social life. In the field of philosophy and metaphysics, the problem touches upon the long-standing tension between voluntarism and determinism, thus raising questions about the extent and limits of our knowledge of the natural and social world, the character of the human will, the role of natural or causal laws in effecting change independently of human action, and so forth. Recent developments in neurobiology and cognitive science, which stress the importance of brain states and the various 'layers of the body/brain/culture network', as against philosophical considerations of the mind, have only rendered the problem even more complicated (Connolly, 2002a; 2005a; 2008a; Habermas, 2008).

At the same time, the problem discloses a range of important issues in social and political theory, including questions about the relative role of individuals and groups in social life, as well as questions about power,

conflict, and subjectivity.¹ In the first instance, the issue highlights significant ontological questions about the nature of human beings and the worlds they inhabit, act in, and seek to know. What are agents and how are they to be conceived? Is agency to be restricted to certain sorts of beings – human beings with intentions, desires, and purposes – or can the notion of agency be extended to all sorts of beings and entities that are picked out by particular ontological standpoints?² How – if it all – is it possible to conceptualize (social) structures of various sorts, and how are they to be related to various sorts of (human) agency? Are these questions in any way answerable apart from detailed empirical investigations of particular contexts?³

These ontological considerations are directly related to issues of method and epistemology. Debate is joined in this regard between different theoretical approaches about the precise explanatory role of individual and collective human agency *vis-à-vis* the various sorts of structural constraint or material conditions that limit social agents and/or directly bring about social change, whether the latter are understood in terms of social systems, objective laws, or logics. Put differently, do structures determine individual actions or do individual actions determine social structures? Questions like these immediately give rise to further queries about the nature of the structures and agents in play in any particular investigation, as well as the ways in which they enable the characterization and explanation of social phenomena. Marxists, structuralists, and Durkheimians find themselves pitted against Weberians, ethnomethodologists, and rational choice theorists.

Accompanying these methodological differences are debates about the various epistemological ideals and knowledge claims one can expect to achieve in the social sciences. Those who place stress on objective structural factors tend to favour causal forms of knowledge, whether conceived as laws, well-founded empirical generalizations, or mechanisms, whilst those who stress the role of human agency or emphasize the incompleteness of social structures tend to favour more contextual forms of knowledge, as well as more critical and interpretative stances. Yet it is important to note that the relationship between methodological and epistemological considerations is contingent rather than necessary. For example, though rational choice theorists focus most of their attention on the intentions and decisions of individual agents, they are for the most part wedded to law-like or mechanistic conceptions of explanation, which are expected to yield predictions and testable propositions. This raises further questions as to whether rational choice theory is

exclusively a species of intentional explanation, as well as queries about its commitment to methodological individualism. At the same time, some of those that affirm the radical contingency of objects and processes have also affirmed the importance of emergent and structural causality.⁴

Finally, the structure-agency problematic has an ethical import. A long tradition of Western philosophical thought insists on a close connection between human agency and questions of morality. On the one hand, powerful traditions of thinking such as Kantianism make discussions about morality dependent on the activities of free and rationally autonomous agents; for without the latter, questions of responsibility and accountability would be effectively dissolved. By contrast, proponents of structural explanations, which employ law-like generalizations or causal mechanisms that are not subject to human will or intention, are questioned about the whole domain of moral conduct and responsible action. Of course, those who do stress the independent importance of human intentions and actions are asked to explicate their moral and ethical orientations and to show how they can be related to their logics of characterization and explanation. For all concerned, this area of discussion raises important questions about how we are to conceptualize human beings and their subjectivity.

It is evident that the problem of structure and agency discloses a cluster of fundamental issues in the social sciences. Following in their wake are a range of theoretical endeavours to bring conceptual and explanatory clarity. Some traditions of social theory endeavour to bypass the dilemma by prioritizing only one pole of the structure-agency dichotomy, whilst others complexify this simple resolution by seeking to connect the two aspects in an ongoing dialectic of structure and agency. In the latter, structures and agents interact with one another in various ways. Different perspectives can thus be classified and positioned along these two axes. Along one axis, they can be defined according to their relative stress on structure or agency, whilst along the other axis they can be characterized by their differing dialectical conceptualizations of structure and agency. This yields a grid of four basic positions: simple structuralism (e.g., Althusserian Marxism), simple voluntarism (e.g., Popper), dialectical structuralism (e.g., Bhaskar's critical realism), and dialectical voluntarism (e.g., Giddens's structuration theory). In the rest of this chapter, I shall endeavour to deconstruct each of these theoretical positions, thus preparing the ground for the poststructuralist alternative I present in Chapter 5.

Structuralism

For a book on the poststructuralist tradition of social theory, it is appropriate that we begin our discussion with structuralism. As I have already argued, the structuralist and poststructuralist problematics are indebted to Saussure and his followers for formalizing the notion of structure and rendering it fit for use in the social sciences. Yet a distinctively structuralist picture is also evident in the work of the later Marx. I shall thus begin by returning to a classic theoretical statement by one of the founding figures of social theory. In his justly famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx summarized his materialist conception of history in the following terms:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

(Karl Marx, 1997e, p. 425)

One immediate implication of Marx's picture of social life is the importance he places on the 'economic structure of society' in shaping and conditioning the ideas and beliefs of social agents, as well as the legal and political systems that govern their conduct. This economic structure is in turn rooted in a particular mode of material production, whether feudalism, capitalism, or socialism, which consists of the relations and forces of production and their dialectical interaction.

At the same time, this 'guiding thread' of Marx's mature writings also contains a powerful logic of social change, which is grounded in an objective contradiction between the forces and relations of production in any given class-divided society. In his words,

At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is just a legal expression of the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work

hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.

In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

(Karl Marx, 1997e, pp. 425–6)

Social and political change is thus brought about by the interplay of objective systemic contradictions, which operate behind the backs of social agents and their forms of consciousness, though at certain moments they may become aware of these of them. What is more, the scientific explanation of these changes cannot rely on the experiences and beliefs of social agents – the ‘ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out’ – but on ‘the material transformation of the economic conditions of production’ alone. In other words, the transformation and reproduction of social life – the underlying economic structure and the ‘immense superstructure’ – ‘must be explained . . . from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production’ (Marx, 1997e, p. 426). Indeed, as Marx puts it, the latter ‘can be determined with the precision of natural science’ (Marx, 1997e, p. 426).

The internal contradictions of economic and social structures thus develop independently of the beliefs and actions of social agents. At the same time, they set powerful constraints on what is possible in the present and the future. As Marx continues:

No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of

their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. The social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close.

(Karl Marx, 1997e, p. 426)

Human beings can only act upon and change those social structures they inherit, and which have exhausted their productive capacities; no real change can occur until immanent possibilities have emerged in the old structures. Here it is quite easy to discern a powerful teleological tendency in Marx's conception of historical change, in which bourgeois relations of production 'are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production', which will inevitably be replaced by a more rational and emancipated social order.

However, it is important to stress that these programmatic formulations do not exhaust Marx's explanation of social and political change. On the contrary, a more agency-centred account is developed in other texts when he stresses the role of class struggles as the motor of history. This is most evident in the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, in which Marx and Engels claim that the 'history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle', though of course this conception can be rendered compatible with a more structuralist account of history, if class antagonisms are nothing more than the reflections and expressions of underlying productive relations (Marx, 1997a, p. 246). Nonetheless, it is certainly the case that Marx's more concrete analyses of particular events and historical conjunctures (such as his careful analyses of the class struggles in France during the late 1840s and early 1850s) disclose a richer and more complex set of concepts and considerations. Here social and political change is the product of a range of social actors, groups, and key individuals, who interact in complicated social

circumstances, such that the crystalline clarity of the model presented in the 1859 Preface is rendered considerably impure. Finally, Marx does insist in his writings on the distinction between a 'class-in-itself' and a 'class-for-itself', in which individuals and groups have to become conscious of their position and interests in the class structure before they are able to act to advance those interests in class struggles.

Yet Marx never integrates these two models of society and change in a satisfactory fashion. On the contrary, his materialist theory of history either relegates class struggles and social action to the role of 'mere supplements' of a more essential logic, such as the conflict between the relations and forces of production, or he institutes a dualistic theory of structure and agency, in which the conceptual connection between the two aspects is not properly theorized. This unresolved ambiguity between structure-centred and agency-centred pictures of society bequeaths an ambiguous inheritance for later social theorists. On the one hand, thinkers such as Gramsci, Lukács, and Sartre have stressed the role of praxis and action in explaining social change, whilst others have defended and developed more objective and deterministic accounts.

Structural Marxism

Amongst the latter, Gerry Cohen draws upon evolutionary theory and analytical philosophy to elaborate a functionalist defence of the strong thesis in Marx, though his emphasis on functional explanation has been challenged by other analytical philosophers of social science, such as Jon Elster, who stresses the role of intentional explanation in the social sciences (e.g., Cohen, 1978; Elster, 1985). For the purposes of our discussion, one significant development of the objective, scientific approach is evident in the emergence of structural Marxism. Whilst Marx's writings clearly emphasized the role of economic structures, and their corresponding system of political and legal superstructures to explain social life, his work preceded the structuralist revolution inaugurated by Saussure and other linguists at the turn of the twentieth century. It was thus left to more contemporary theorists in the 1960s and 1970s such as Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Manuel Castells, Pierre Macherey, Nicos Poulantzas, and others to articulate an explicitly structuralist account of Marxism.⁵

Althusser endeavoured to break with all forms of economism and determinism, in which ideological and political elements such as political institutions or particular ideologies are mere epiphenomena of an underlying material substructure, as well as teleological accounts of historical change, in which abstract notions such as freedom or reason are

seen to motivate and structure all meaningful social change. By contrast, his 'return to Marx' takes forward the structuralist idea that social formations are decentred structures – systems of related elements – which are not grounded on any human essence or law of history, but consist of a plurality of elements articulated together into complex 'structures in dominance' (Althusser, 1969, pp. 200–18). In this view, society comprises the economic, political, ideological, and theoretical levels, in which each of these regions can be decomposed into more molecular components and sub-systems, and each instance exhibits its own relative autonomy, where the economic level only determines 'in the last instance' (Althusser, 1969, p. 111; Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp. 100, 227, 325).

Althusser's structuralist conception of social order is predicated on a new conceptualization of contradiction, which for him is always overdetermined. He borrows this concept from Freud's interpretation of dreams, coupled with a reworking of causality, which he dubs 'structural causality' (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp. 186, 188, 224). Opposing the reduction of social change to the operation of a single underlying contradiction between capital and labour, in which the latter is rooted in the conflict between the forces and relations of production, Althusser stresses a multiplicity of co-existing contradictions that *overdetermine* one another. Freud coined the notion of overdetermination to decipher the two ways in which the dream work transforms latent dream-thoughts into the manifest content of the dream. This representational process either involves the compression of a number of dream-thoughts into one image (the logic of condensation) or the transference of psychical intensity from one image to another (the logic of displacement). By analogy, Althusser uses these logics of psychic overdetermination to indicate the different ways in which contradictions 'overdetermine' one another in the materialist theory of history. In the 'normal' reproduction of a social formation, the principal contradictions of that order are neutralized by the logic of displacement, whilst in a revolutionary situation they may condense or fuse into a revolutionary rupture (condensation), which may bring about rapid social change.

The concept of overdetermination thus makes room for a plurality of contradictions that exist together in various regions and sub-systems of a social formation. But it is not a story of multicausality, in which there is a simple pluralization of various causal chains or mechanisms that interact to bring about an effect. Instead, the concept intimates a different order of causality altogether – structural causality – which for Althusser transcends the classical linear or expressive models. Whilst

the linear model of causality (i.e., the transitive, mechanical, or efficient conceptions) only captures the effects of one element on another, and whilst expressive (or teleological or final) conceptions describe the effect of the whole on the parts, but render the latter an 'expression' of the former – an outward phenomenon of an inner essence – Althusser draws on Spinoza's philosophy to conceptualize 'the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations by the effectivity of that structure' (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p. 186). He thus introduces 'a new concept of the effect of the whole on the parts', in which the 'complex totality' of the 'structure in dominance' is 'a structure of effects with *present-absent causes*. The cause of the effects is the complex organization of the whole, *present-absent* in its economic, political, ideological and knowledge effects' (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p. 310).

There is no question that Althusser's theoretical approach reinvigorated the Marxist theory of society, ideology, and subjectivity. His stress on the relative autonomy of the three (or four) systems of practice that constitute a social formation, and his emphasis on the 'overdetermined' character of social contradictions, carried the promise of breaking with the reductionist and determinist model of society represented in classical Marxism. At the same time, his approach yielded a distinctive understanding of structure, agency, and power.⁶ First, in keeping with his overall philosophy, Althusser's theory of structure and agency problematized 'humanist' or voluntarist accounts of historical materialism, which overemphasize the role of human subjectivity and agency in explaining social change, and placed greater emphasis on the dynamic interaction of contradictory social structures. It is the latter that shapes the character and direction of social change. What is more, somewhat ironically perhaps, Althusser's reworked idea of structural causality prised opened the space for a rethinking of political agency. Many commentators have argued that Althusser's proposed solution to the paradoxes of the classical models of causality merely restates the problem he diagnosed in new terms but does not advance very far in properly fleshing out an alternative view (e.g., Benton, 1984; Callinicos, 1976; Geras, 1972). Yet his notion of 'absent causality' is in my view a crucial theoretical breakthrough, especially when it is allied with his concept of dislocation, which problematizes the closure and regularity of any structure, for it puts us in a position to acknowledge that all social systems are incomplete or lacking in some respect. In this way, when we inquire into what Derrida calls the 'structurality of structure', we find that it is always flawed or eccentric; the idea of a centre is constantly

deferred and subject to play (Derrida, 1978, p. 280). By thus stressing the complex interaction between absence and presence, in which space is also marked by time, Althusser paved the way for *poststructuralists* to foreground the incompleteness and play in any order, which is always marked by an ontological negativity.

Yet Althusser still insisted that the economic system determines which level is to be the dominant element in any particular society, and economic processes still determine the functioning and reproduction of society as a whole albeit 'in the last instance' (Althusser, 1969, pp. 117–28). It is evident that this conception fails to transcend the determinism of the Marxist theory of society, so that the 'relative autonomy' of the ideological and political superstructures is confined to providing the conditions for the overall reproduction of capitalist social relations. At the same time, he never fully justified the initial grounds for separating the different levels of the social formation, nor did he provide a convincing argument for the fact that the economic and ideological levels perform determining roles in all societies (Cutler et al., 1977, pp. 207–21). Another important consequence of his separation of society into distinct 'regions' or 'levels' is to rule out a more relational conception of different systems of social practice, even though the latter is implicit in Althusser's use of the Freudian concept of overdetermination in which it is impossible to disentangle the different elements of society as they are mutually intertwined.⁷ It has been left to poststructuralists and post-Marxists to stress the relational and incomplete character of social formations, whilst also stressing the primacy of politics in their constitution.

A final difficulty with the Althusserian system of society is that there appears to be very little space for conflicting forms of interpellation and identification, which may challenge the existing 'structure-in-dominance'. This confirms the functionalist overtones of Althusser's theoretical model, in which each element has the purpose of maintaining the reproduction of the system as a whole (Benton, 1984, pp. 105–7). But it also exposes difficulties with Althusser's account of agency and subjectivity. By insisting that subjects are 'interpellated' or 'recruited' by ideological practices, Althusser's anti-humanist philosophy opposes those perspectives that view the subject as an originator of its own consciousness, or endowed with essential properties, such as economic interests or primordial identities. Yet ideological practices still form a 'relatively autonomous' region of a social formation that is separate from the political and economic systems, and the ideological is still determined by the economic.

In other words, whilst this perspective correctly shows how the identities of subjects are discursively constructed by various ideological practices, he tends to reduce their autonomy to the operation of pre-existing structures. For example, in *Reading Capital*, Althusser and Balibar argue that

Not only is the economic a structured region occupying its particular place in the global structure of the social whole, but even in its own site, in its (relative) regional autonomy, it functions as a regional *structure* and as such determines its elements. Here once again we find... that the structure of the relations of production determines the *places* and *functions* occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the supports (*Träger*) of these functions.

(Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p. 180)

As the economic structure of society determines 'the places and functions' that are 'occupied and adopted' by social agents, subjects become little more than the 'bearers of structures'. And though in my view his notion of the play of absence-presence, when coupled with his reworked idea of dislocation, makes possible a different conception of structures, as well as a role for human and non-human agency, this line of flight is not fully pursued in Althusser's thinking. It was left to poststructuralist Marxists, or post-Marxists, to tread this path.

Agency-centred approaches

The emergence of agency-centred perspectives in modern thought precedes the structuralist problematic inaugurated by the Marxist tradition. Whereas Marx accepted Rousseau's insight that human beings are organically connected to one other, and thus to the intricate network of social relations in which they are embedded, agency-centred perspectives focus on the role of free and autonomous human agents, who have the power to change their social institutions and relations. One important theoretical source for agency-centred perspectives is liberalism, which emerged in the seventeenth century. Put bluntly, liberalism functions as a significant other against which Marxism and other more sociological traditions are constituted (e.g., Macpherson, 1964).

The liberal tradition of thought can be traced back to classical philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Smith in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it includes the stress on rational autonomy in the Kantian

tradition, as well as the utilitarianism of Bentham, James Mill, and J. S. Mill. In more contemporary theoretical circles, it is evident in rational choice theory and game theory, as well as certain variants of interpretivism (e.g., Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; 2004; Olson, 1965). The stress on individual human agency also pervades much analytical political theory. It is especially visible amongst those who have followed the philosophies of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin in reworking liberal thinking in contemporary democratic societies (e.g., Pettit, 1996; Rawls, 1971; 1996).

Though by no means a classical liberal, the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes is a good starting point in this regard. In his classical work of political theory, the *Leviathan*, Hobbes anchors his account of the 'matter, form and power' of a 'commonwealth' (or state) in a particular conception of human nature. He first assumes that by engaging in a process of introspection – looking inward into our own beliefs and desires – we are able to discover the universal properties and characteristics of all human beings, regardless of time or social context. Because of the 'similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man' with the 'thoughts and passions of another', Hobbes argues that 'whosoever looketh into himself, and considerith what he doth, when he does think, opine, reason, hope, fear, etc. and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon like occasions' (Hobbes, 1991, p. 10). Put differently, and if we interpolate the words of David Hume, Hobbes assumes 'that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages', so that 'human nature remains still the same' in these various contexts and times (Hume, 2000, p. 64).

Yet the particular character of Hobbes's conception of human nature arises from his concept of a 'natural condition' of mankind, where there is no common power 'able to over-awe them all' (Hobbes, 1991, p. 88). As against Locke's more benign state of nature, in which we ordinarily follow the Golden Rule that arises from our respect for natural rights, and thus love our fellow human creatures, so that the state of war only comes about when someone proposes to violate someone else's rights, Hobbes argued that such a 'dissolute condition of masterlesse men, without subjection to Lawes, and a coercive Power to tye their hands from rapine, and revenge' would render impossible the security of condition upon which comfortable, sociable, civilized life depends. In this peculiar state, there would be

no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the

commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.

(Hobbes, 1991, p. 89)

If this is the state of nature, people have strong reasons to avoid it, and this can only be achieved by submitting to some mutually recognized public authority, for so long a man 'is in the condition of mere nature, (which is a condition of war,) as private appetite is the measure of good and evill' (Hobbes, 1991, p. 90). This famously pessimistic philosophical anthropology then serves to justify Hobbes's authoritarian concept of sovereignty, in which power is vested in a single body, as the only antidote to the brutishness and disorder of the state of nature. Individuals in the state of nature use their reason to form a social contract in which they consent to cede power to an authorized body that can exercise supreme power over them.

One striking feature of this picture of human beings is the way in which Hobbes confidently extracts human beings out of their ongoing social relationships so as to consider them in their natural condition, as well as his view that human beings are essentially 'solitary' and self-interested agents than can use their reason and powers to achieve freely chosen ends. Agreements, social contracts, and institutions are thus the products of individual wills and decisions guided by universal reason, which Hobbes captures with his conception of natural law. This model of individuals freed from a determining and purposeful universe is intimately connected to the particular historical context in which it was elaborated. Writing in the seventeenth century, this context was strongly marked by the emergence of the modern scientific revolution with its emphasis on the idea of a world of mechanical causes and discrete events. Science, for Hobbes, thus consisted of a special method – Galileo's 'resolutive-compositive' method – in which everything, including the matter, generation, and form of civil government, 'is best understood by its constitutive causes' (Hobbes, 1949, pp. 10–1).⁸

In the view of thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Charles Taylor, this naturalistic conception of the universe was partly made possible and bolstered by Hobbes's vision of human agency and language (Heidegger, 1993b). In this vision, the world consists of a neutral and objectified set of phenomena from which human beings are 'capable of achieving a kind of disengagement ... by objectifying it'; we can thus

objectify our situation to the extent that we can overcome a sense of it as what determines for us our paradigm purposes and ends, and can come to see it and function in it as a neutral environment, within which we can effect the purposes which we determine out of our selves.

(Taylor, 1985a, p. 4)

At the same time, language comprises a system of representation that can picture a world of things that is external to language and to which linguistic signs refer. Hobbes's nominalist philosophy thus develops a model of language in which words are names that designate particular objects in the world, rather than expressing something about it or our feelings, or even constituting the world. Expressed in his more epochal terms, Heidegger argues that the entire modern period is constituted by a free-standing human subjectivity that 'views' the world as a 'picture' from which it is detached (Heidegger, 1993b). What we have, therefore, is an increasingly atomized picture of the world, where individual human beings are 'metaphysically independent of society', and nature is conceived as a separate and objective 'standing reserve' that we can explain in causal terms and then use for our own purposes.

Hobbes's ontological assumptions about the centrality of solitary and self-interested human beings as the ultimate components of social relations, and his designative account of language, were shared by many of his contemporaries. They are evident in Locke's liberal political theory and his empiricist epistemology, as well as Hume's philosophical and political thought. They also underpin the birth of classical political economy, as developed by Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and David Ricardo, and were advanced by Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century, when developing their utilitarian philosophy. In fact, they are still present in much contemporary social and political theorizing, as they form the bedrock of contemporary rational choice and game theory. But the idea of human societies as the product of individual will and intention is also evident in the Kantian tradition of moral philosophy and analytical philosophy more generally. In more contemporary theory, it pervades much analytical political theory and is especially visible amongst those who have followed the philosophy of John Rawls in reworking liberal thinking in contemporary democratic societies.

In comparison with simple structuralism, then, the agency-centred view focuses on the beliefs, desires, actions, and decisions of individual actors, rather than the laws, mechanisms, needs, or functions of

social structures or systems. It tends to foreground the role of individual human actors in producing and reproducing social relations. However, the logic of the position does not necessarily restrict the approach to *human* subjects, because a range of social entities can be regarded as agents by some perspectives. These include states, groups, movements, or even social classes. Yet questions are still raised here about how these more global entities are to be described and analysed. Methodological individualists are apt to decompose such entities into their individual human components, whilst others are happy to accept that agency applies to non-human actors. In general, though, those whom I have gathered under the label of agency-centred perspectives tend to highlight the role of individual beliefs, desires, purposes, and traditions, as well as the importance of strategies and strategic interactions in accounting for the social world.

The explanation of social phenomena thus involves the bracketing of the various social contexts and structural constraints impinging on individual agents, followed by an analysis of their intentions, strategies, and self-understandings. Those subscribing to this perspective thus tend to investigate the 'micro-practices' of social interaction, rather than the 'macro-embeddedness' of actions, in which actions are situated within particular social contexts and structural constraints (see Lichbach, 2009). These assumptions serve as a useful antidote to the dangers of reifying and anthropomorphizing social and political institutions. In other words, they caution against the temptation to treat institutions and organizations such as the state as subjects with beliefs, desires, and intentions. They thus guard against essentialist conceptions of social formations and political institutions. But these commitments also leave them vulnerable to the charge of another form of essentialism, that is, the essentialism of self-contained agents, who are equipped with the requisite properties to reflect, strategize, and make decisions without recourse to broader practices, institutions, contexts, unconscious forces, and so on.

Rational choice models

Perhaps the most sophisticated version of this perspective is evident in rational choice theory. Not only do many of its proponents exhibit a fundamental commitment to methodological individualism, whilst developing various forms of intentional explanation, but they also elaborate important substantive theories of politics and society, and they have sought to test these theories by applying them to empirical problems and phenomena. Rational choice theory is based on an analogy

between the classical and neo-classical models of the market, on the one hand, with its commitments to the laws of supply and demand, and the optimal functioning of the price mechanism, and the construction and functioning of social relations and political processes on the other (see McClean, 1987).

As Elster argues, the approach is based on a deceptively simple proposition, namely that 'when faced with several courses of action, people usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome for them' (Elster, 1989, p. 22). What has become known as the 'rational actor model' consists of four basic assumptions. First, people have clear preferences of which they are fully conscious, and they can rank these preferences from best to worse. Secondly, the logic of preference ordering is transitive, and thus logically consistent. In other words, if I prefer the game of cricket over rugby; rugby over football, then I must prefer cricket over football. Thirdly, in choosing between different courses of action they are assumed to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs by making a rational calculation that advances their interests or values (e.g., Harsanyi, 1976). Finally, individuals are assumed to be egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental; they consistently act in their own self-interest (e.g., Ward, 2002, pp. 65–89).

In this conception, the idea of rationality is understood in instrumental terms. In other words, actions are valued as a means to an end. Rationality thus answers questions about the best means of securing a particular goal. For example, if I wish to prevent global warming, then I should support public policies that reduce carbon emissions and I should engage in social practices that lessen my carbon footprint. Rationality in this view is thin, rather than thick or substantive. In other words, rationality is restricted to those forms of reasoning that are logically consistent. Reason does not therefore encompass substantive questions about the good life or dwell on the necessary conditions for the realization of human emancipation, as some critical theorists have contended. Importantly, this conception of rationality excludes the idea that social and political actions are conducted for emotional, ideological, or purely subjective reasons. Preferences in this approach are usually understood in terms of an individual's selfishness, that is, people act self-interestedly, though in some instances self-interest can be construed in terms of values, though such values must be rationally ordered. The emphasis on instrumental rationality tends to exclude social behaviour carried out in accordance with binding norms or sedimented institutional rules, though the latter may be explained in purely rational terms.

Rational choice and social choice theory has been used extensively in the social sciences for both normative and explanatory purposes. For example, John Rawls uses John Harsanyi's theory of games to model the way in which rational individuals ought to choose principles of justice when deprived of basic information about their relative economic and social position in a society. But its more important application is in terms of positive social and political theory. Perhaps the most persuasive example is elaborated by Mancur Olson in his explanation of collective action. What he terms the problem of collective action arises from his critique of group theory in its various manifestations. Notwithstanding the substantive and methodological differences amongst pluralist, corporatist, Marxist, and New Right theories of groups – along with their many internal variations – Olson argues that each theory assumes the *givenness* of the groups that are formed in society, and which then intervene in the policy process to propose and implement public policies (e.g., Brittan, 1975; Jessop, 1982; King, 1987, pp. 64–8; Miliband, 1969; Schmitter, 1974; Smith, 1995a). In other words, whilst each theory offers an account of the relationship between groups and the government, as well as their respective power and influence, they do not satisfactorily address the difficulties of group formation and mobilization. Pluralists and Marxists may disagree about which groups are powerful or have influence, but they tend to presume (even if implicitly) that people who share common interests will join groups, and that those groups and its leaders act on their behalf. Corporatist accounts argue that certain institutional frameworks, such as those engineered by the state, facilitate and constrain group formation and mobilization, whilst New Right theorists focus on the deleterious effects of groups on policymaking and state intervention. Yet in both perspectives the problem of collective action remains unaddressed.

In short, not one of these viewpoints tackles what Mancur Olson names the 'collective action problem', which centres on the existence of 'free-riders' who question the rationality of joining groups because the costs of membership are likely to exceed the benefits they obtain regardless of their involvement (Olson, 1965). This paradox arises from the fact that the formation and mobilization of groups in pursuit of collective benefits aim to achieve 'public goods', which are both indivisible and once attained not excludable.⁹ However, as Olson succinctly notes, expounding the basic tenets of rational choice theory, '*rational self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests*' (Olson, 1965, p. 2). Unless the potential size of a group is small, thereby facilitating the monitoring of potential free-riders, or unless the

group can employ negative and/or positive sanctions against potential free-riders, no groups are likely to emerge in pursuit of their common interests:

Only a *separate* and '*selective*' *incentive* will stimulate a rational individual in a latent group to act in a group-oriented way. In such circumstances group action can be obtained only through an incentive that operates, not indiscriminately, like the collective good, upon the group as a whole, but rather *selectively* toward the individuals in the group.

(Olson, 1965, p. 51)

For example, my decision to join a trade union or an environmental interest group rests less upon the common benefits that these organizations aim to realize, and more upon the exclusive benefits I can obtain in so doing.

This key insight provides one of the important starting points for rational choice theorists to rethink the logic of group formation and collective mobilization. Not only does it raise key questions concerning the relationship between individuals and groups, as well as the internal dynamics of groups, but it also problematizes the crucial concept of interests. It argues that latent groups may be undermobilized or not formed at all, whilst also suggesting a number of 'supply side' solutions to these structural impediments, though these are not fully explored. The latter include the centrality of selective material incentives, the role of political entrepreneurs and political movers, as well as the possibility of groups 'piggybacking' on existing organizations, or making use of state resources, which all reduce the costs of collective action (see Dowding, 1996, pp. 38–41; Oberschall, 1973, p. 159). Finally, the orthodox model accounts for the internal structuring of groups, as well as the cycle of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization characteristic of cause groups (especially environmental groups), as they 'often move towards organisational hierarchy, relative passivity of group members, and corporatist entanglements with the state' (Ward, 1997, p. 5).

There is no doubt that agency-centred approaches have added much to our understanding and critical explanation of many key phenomena of social life. Rational choice theory, for example, helps us to explain why people join groups and social movements, as well as the formation of political coalitions and the relations between states. In normative terms, with respect to a theory of the good, agency-centred approaches

(especially contemporary liberalism) yield the largely uncontroversial assumption that 'whatever is good or bad about a set of institutions is something that is good or bad for the people whom they affect' (Pettit, 1993, p. 23). But, as various communitarians, Marxists, and structuralists have argued, the problem with these approaches is their subscription to a form of social atomism that dissolves institutions, structures, and the thick sets of social relations within which agents acquire their identities and act (e.g., Mulhall and Swift, 1996; but also Bird, 1999). Institutions, organizations, and cultural systems are thus reduced to the (rational) choices and decisions of individual actors, and the latter are ascribed various properties and dispositions (such as 'rationality' or a 'sense of justice') independently of the contexts and traditions in which they have been acquired.

More specifically, rational choice theorists and proponents of game theory tend to assume that an agent's interests (usually understood as preferences) are given and fixed, and that these interests govern their beliefs, desires, and actions. Yet there seems no good reason not to assume that an agent's preferences and interests, not to mention their intentions, are shaped and changed by ongoing social processes, crises, and dislocations; nor is it altogether clear why we should assume that subjects are not riven with competing identities and interests, in which interests are shaped and relative to these malleable identities. At the same time, the normative downside of these ontological commitments is what Phillip Pettit calls a 'valuational solipsism', in which it is assumed that 'any property that can serve as an ultimate political value, any property that can be regarded as a fundamental yardstick of political assessment, has to be capable of instantiation by the socially isolated person: by the solitary individual' (Pettit, 1993, p. 23). Valuational solipsism is the flip side of social atomism, which as I have argued stretches back at least to the work of Thomas Hobbes.

In short, if structuralists run the risk of essentializing social structures, then agency-centred approaches come dangerously close to a form of subjective essentialism, in which the individual subject constitutes the ground of the social. An essentialism of social structures or (human or non-human) agents does not resolve the problem. What we need instead is a more sophisticated theory of subject and agency, together with a consideration of their connection to social and natural structures, institutions, and cultural traditions. So having raised important questions about both simple structuralist and agency-centred perspectives, I shall now turn to those approaches that have sought to elaborate more relational and dialectical perspectives.

Structuration theory

The key contribution of Giddens's theory of structuration is his endeavour to move beyond the objectivism of simple structuralist accounts, which are best illustrated by Althusser's rethinking of the Marxist dialectic, and the subjectivism of simple agency-centred perspectives, whether these are represented by rational choice theory or its interpretative other. Instead of separating the objective and the subjective – structure and agency – he seeks to develop a dialectical account of their interaction, which involves a subtle reworking of the basic concepts that are implicated in the relationship. Because Giddens is critical of those theoretical traditions that emphasize only one pole of the structure-agency dialectic, he seeks instead to deconstruct and rearticulate elements of these opposed traditions to rethink the problem. He thus draws upon hermeneutics, phenomenology, and practice-based approaches to connect the structural and subjective dimensions of social reality, and he uses their theoretical resources to reconceptualize the structural and contextual aspects of reality.

On the one hand, then, he rejects the idea that social structures are simply external or internal constraints on human action by stressing their role in facilitating certain practices and actions; structures exist *within* agents as virtual and potential memory traces. On the other hand, he situates human agents within particular social contexts and shows how structures are internal to agents; this is because structures are understood as a virtual set of potential resources that exist as 'memory traces', which can be drawn upon by agents when they engage in purposeful action. At the same time, he complexifies the picture of human agency by dividing the subject into unconscious/practical and reflective components.

Giddens thus attempts to move beyond binary accounts of structure and agency, which privilege either structure or agency in an *a priori* way by arguing that the notion of structuration involves the 'duality of structure'. Structuration captures the way in which social life exhibits a 'recursive character' – the fact that certain social properties can be repeated in an infinite fashion – as well as the 'mutual dependence' of structure and agency. The duality of structure thus means 'that the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems'. In this picture of social relations,

structure is both enabling and constraining, and it is one of the specific tasks of social theory to study the conditions in the organisation

of social systems that govern the interconnections between the two. According to this conception, the same structural characteristics participate in the subject (actor) as in the object (society). Structure forms 'personality' and 'society' simultaneously... *Structure is not to be considered as a barrier to action, but as essentially involved in its production.*

(Giddens, 1979, pp. 69–70)

Giddens illustrates the duality of structure and agency by focussing on the way we use language to speak and communicate. Here he draws on Saussure and the structuralist tradition more generally to demonstrate the recursive character of language as a system of rules and resources and the way in which human actions both presuppose structures and then contribute to their reproduction through their individual acts and actions. As Giddens puts it,

When I utter a sentence I draw upon various syntactical rules (sedimented in my practical consciousness of the language) in order to do so. These structural features of the language are the medium whereby I generate the utterance. But in producing a syntactically correct utterance I simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of the language as a whole... The importance of this relation between moment and totality for social theory can hardly be exaggerated, involving as it does a dialectic of presence and absence which ties the most minor or trivial forms of social action to structural properties of the overall society, and to the coalescence of institutions over long stretches of historical time.

(Giddens, 1982, p. 114)

Moreover, the recursive and dialectical relationship between system and action can be extended to other domains and aspects of social life, whether it is the building of a wall, the construction of a social movement, or the reproduction of a particular form of family life. In this view, social practices require structures that are drawn upon by agents in accomplishing particular goals or purposes. At the same time, their particular interactions with other subjects and objects, and their experiences of such practices, impact upon the structures that make possible and inform future interactions.

Giddens's work has attracted considerable critical attention (e.g., Held and Thompson, 1989). Critical realists like Margaret Archer and Bob Jessop (which I discuss later in this chapter) have criticized Giddens's theory of structuration because in their view it does not properly address

the constraining and determining effects of social structures on human practices. Rather than dissolving structures and agents into an indeterminate theory of structuration, Archer seeks to reinstate the idea of an 'analytical dualism' by emphasizing the constraining and causal impact of independently defined structural conditions, which pre-exist and condition/shape social interaction, even though the latter may in turn change or reproduce the structures, along with their emergent causal powers and properties (Archer, 1995, pp. 151, 167–8; Stones, 2005, p. 53). In the view of Archer, Jessop, and others, Giddens 'resolves' the structure-agency dilemma by simply redefining social structures as an internal component of human agency, thus producing a new species of subjectivism or voluntarism. External and internal constraints, especially the limitations of unequally distributed material resources, are thus neglected in Giddens's theory.

Other commentators have disputed these allegations. In *Structuration Theory*, Stones convincingly shows that Giddens does retain a commitment to external structures, even though it often remains hidden or implicit in his theory. For example, in *The Constitution of Society*, Giddens distinguishes three types of constraint that confront social actors: 'material constraints, negative social sanctions, and structural constraints that arise from the given character of structural properties *vis-à-vis* situated actors' (Giddens, 1984, p. 176). He thus argues that 'structural constraints' stem 'from the "objective existence" of structural properties that the individual agent is unable to change. As with the constraining qualities of sanctions, it is best described as placing limits upon the range of options open to an actor, or plurality of actors, in a given circumstance or type of circumstance' (Giddens, 1984, pp. 176–7, cited in Stones, 2005, p. 59). Giddens thus immerses the subject in three sets of structural relations – the structures of domination, legitimation, and signification – that exist as knowledge potentials for a subject, and are lodged in 'memory traces'. These are distinguished from various 'modalities', where the latter refer to the particular ways in which subjects use these rules and resources in their actual practices (Stones, 2009, pp. 93–4).

But whilst these formulations suffice to rebut the idea that there is no 'analytical dualism' between structures and agents in Giddens's approach, Stones is still critical of Giddens's methodological voluntarism, which is rooted in his overly abstract ontological presuppositions. For example, in his discussion of power, Giddens is ambiguous about the relationship between 'structures as memory traces' and 'structures as resources'. Sometimes the former is emphasized, so that material

constraints and capabilities are important in determining the character and prospects of social change, whereas in other texts he stresses the role of material resources, in which case structures are internal to agents and only instantiated in action. When structures are conceptualized as inner memory traces, he seems to prioritize the hermeneutical and phenomenological elements of his approach over the material and the structural. It also means that the division between agency and structure is blurred so that the task of determining external constraints is made difficult, if not impossible. In short, Giddens's account remains schematic and emptied of particular content when employed to account for particular empirical instances and contexts of action, transformation, and reproduction. General ontological questions concerning the relationship between structure and agency are not complemented with the concern for particular situated agents acting in specific structural contexts.

By contrast, in developing his strong version of structuration theory, Stones argues for what he calls a 'quadripartite cycle of structuration', which as the name implies involves four connected elements: external structures, internal structures, active agency, and the intended and unintended consequences of action. In this view, then, any analysis of an agent-in-focus can initially bracket the meanings and understandings of the latter to situate the agent in a structural context (external structures), whilst also exploring the embodied phenomenological conditions within the agent that enable agents to relay between external structures and their orientations to future actions (internal structures). The latter are further divided into the 'general dispositions' (which are somewhat akin to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*) within particular agents-in-focus, and 'conjuncturally-specific knowledge', which designates the changing array of knowledge and understanding that the agent has of the external contexts within which he or she operates (Stones, 2009, p. 96). The third element of the cycle consists of active agency, which picks out the different ways in which an agent either routinely and pre-reflectively, or strategically and critically, makes use of his or her internal structures to act in particular situations (Stones, 2005, p. 85). The final aspect of the structuration cycle is that of intended and unintended consequences of actions, which shape external and internal structures, as well as events, outcomes, and the general well-being of actors themselves.

This 'quadripartite cycle' thus endeavours to reconcile the objective and subjective elements of structuration theory, whilst linking the spatial and temporal dimensions of social life. Stones's account of social

change suggests that shifts are the result of structural pressures and determinations, as well as human practices and interventions, which can actively transform structural contexts. But he also seeks to supplement his ontological reordering of structuration theory with a set of methodological and epistemological interventions that can 'develop bridging concepts' between Giddens's highly abstract theoretical categories of philosophical thought and the conduct of theoretically informed empirical research. More fully, in articulating a series of mediating concepts and rules between the philosophical and substantive levels of structuration, his strong theory of structuration seeks to supplement Giddens's emphasis on 'ontology-in-general' with what he calls a focus on 'ontology-in-situ', that is, an 'ontology directed at the "ontic", at particular social processes and events in particular times and places' (Stones, 2005, pp. 7–8). By shifting focus in this way, the untapped potential of structuration theory at the empirical and substantive levels can be mined and exploited.¹⁰

In sum, Stones's sophisticated development of Giddens's theory seeks to reinstate the analytical dualism between structures and agents, though he is wary of making this dualism into a hard ontological dichotomy. He thus supplements the focus in much of Giddens's writings on the way agents internalize their structural conditions by emphasizing the material contexts and constraints of actions and practices, whilst adding a much needed emphasis on the requisite research strategies that can harness the advances of Giddens's ontological and theoretical advances. Indeed, his rethinking and elaboration of structuration theory pushes us towards another attempt to overcome the sharp separation between simple structuralist and agency perspectives in the name of developing a more dialectical picture.¹¹ This brings me conveniently to Roy Bhaskar's efforts to develop a critical realist perspective.

Critical realism

As I have suggested, although critical realists endorse the way in which Giddens seeks to transcend simple structuralist and intentionalist accounts by developing a more recursive and dialectical theory, they are not entirely convinced that his dialectical resolution of the problem does not end up privileging the role of agents and individual human agency over structures. In part, this arises from his tendency to redefine external structures as memory traces that are internal to human agents and thus to downplay structural constraints on individual human action. Yet though some of their criticisms miss their mark in

crucial respects, their alternative account does add a couple of twists to contemporary discussions of the issue. The crux of the realist position is captured by Roy Bhaskar's claim that 'society is both the ever-present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency' (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 37). For example, individuals choose to get married for a variety of subjective reasons, and in a range of different circumstances, but each of the individual acts thus contributes to the reproduction of marriage as a social institution, and these acts could in some instances result in the transformation of such social structures. Bhaskar's discussion of structure and agency thus goes to the heart of his social theory, which in turn is grounded in his distinctively realist philosophy of science and social science (Bhaskar, 1975; 1998).

Bhaskar's critical realism starts by investigating the necessary and universal conditions for the possibility of any science. His response to this Kantian question is that scientific practices such as designing and carrying out experiments, observing phenomena in the world, drawing inferences, and so on require a world that is populated by real things and structures, whose properties and causal mechanisms can be disclosed and described (Outhwaite, 1987, p. 31). Meaningful scientific activity must therefore necessarily and universally presume an ontology comprising real things that exist independently of our consciousness and experience. It must also presume that these properties and mechanisms persist in the 'open systems' beyond the closed experimental situation, where the hypothesized causal chains can be isolated from potentially contaminating influences (Bhaskar, 1975, p. 91). This transcendental account of science seeks to capture the depth and richness of the object world by proposing a threefold stratification: the *real*, which is made up of the inherent properties of, and causal mechanisms linking, objects; the *actual*, which consists of events; and the *empirical*, which is made up of our experiences of such events (Stones, 1996, pp. 28–32). According to Bhaskar, the movement between each of these discrete levels is contingent and not necessary. Events can thus occur without necessarily being experienced by a subject at the level of its representations; multiple causal mechanisms and tendencies can be triggered and occur, yet no actual event or outcome ever takes place, because they may be counteracted or modified by other mechanisms.¹²

Bhaskar's Kantian starting point also informs his account of the social world. He thus inquires into the conditions that make social science possible: '*what properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?*' (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 13). Here he also takes an 'ontological turn' in answering this question by positing

the existence of objective structures, rather than the acts or intentions of individual human agents, or rule-governed behaviour, as the ultimate ground of social theory (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 20). Social structures provide the true object of social science. But the logic of discovery and explanation is modified in the social sciences, because of the greater degree of complexity of the social world, and because of the peculiar character of social science. It is still the case that both the natural and social worlds exhibit the same ontological stratification, comprising the empirical, the actual, and the real. Yet in this conception social structures or systems – unlike natural structures – do not exist independently of the activities they govern,¹³ nor are they simply external to the agents' conceptions of what they are doing; they are woven into the practices, actions, and ideas of agents.

Also, because the systems and structures of the social world are intrinsically 'open' and contingent, in the sense that they are not amenable to the 'closed' experimental procedures of the natural sciences, which can control for potentially spurious factors, they are not suitable for the same kind of empirical testing. This means that the logic of explanation in the social sciences revolves around the *positing* of generative mechanisms, rather than the strict deductive logic of exhaustive and successful predictive tests. In short, whilst Bhaskar posits the existence of causal mechanisms and trends in the social sciences (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 21), he opposes the presumption that such trends and mechanisms are reducible to empirical regularities, and he challenges the belief that such mechanisms can be confirmed within the confines of 'closed systems' (*à la* natural science) (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 29–30). In his words, 'the appraisal and development of theories in the social sciences *cannot be predictive* and so must be *exclusively explanatory*' (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 21).

Critical realists thus reject the 'epistemic fallacy' associated with empiricist and positivist paradigms, because it is argued that the latter reduce the world and our investigative practices to our representations and knowledge claims about it. In this view, the philosophy of science and social science is confined to the kinds of statement we can make about objects or events: their truth or falsity, whether they are analytical or synthetic, their degree of verisimilitude, and so forth. Instead, Bhaskar and his school are initially concerned with the way the world has to be in order for knowledge claims and experience to be possible at all. He thus insists that the world is composed of *real objects* with specific properties and generative causal mechanisms that are presupposed in our actions and experiences at the phenomenological level, and which

make possible our knowledge of the world. Only then can science and social science gain a foothold in the world it is investigating.

Bhaskar's abstract discussion of structure and agency has been fleshed out by those who are interested in more concrete phenomena and social relations, such as social movements and groups, or the role of the state and its relationships to social classes and other agencies in civil society (e.g., Hay, 1995; Jessop, 1982; Stones, 1996). As I have noted, Bhaskar's dialectical model gives greater emphasis to the role of external structural constraints, rather than the strategic conduct of agents, which is stressed by Giddens and other structuration theorists. But these external constraints embody the previous practices and actions of social agents, and they exercise their power by strategically selecting some options and courses of action over others. The 'duality' of structure and agency in Giddens's model is now understood in terms of an intertwining of structure and agency, which are enmeshed together in practice. In this conception, then, various sorts of agency occur *within* already existing structures and contexts, in which the latter furnish particular sets of possible courses of action, whilst helping us to determine their likely outcomes. However, they cannot fully determine such outcomes, as this would be to reduce the complexity of the social world to law-like regularities that can only subsist in the natural world. Like Giddens, structural conditions and contexts both constrain action, preventing or restricting some options in certain cases, but they also enable various actions. Contexts and structures are the product of previous practices and are 'strategically selective': they are susceptible to some strategies and closed to others (Hay, 1995).

One of the best examples of critical realism in practice is Bob Jessop's theory of the capitalist state (Jessop, 1982; 1990; 2002a). Building also on the work of Gramsci, Althusser, Poulantzas, and others, he argues that 'the form of the state is the crystallisation of past strategies as well as [the] privileging of some other current strategies. As a strategic terrain the state is located within a complex dialectic of structures and strategies' (Jessop, 1990, p. 129). This complex dialectic of structures and strategies are in his words 'strategically selective' in that they are more open to some types of political strategy and representation than others (Jessop, 1990, p. 260). More precisely, drawing on the later Poulantzas, he argues that 'state power is a form-determined material condensation of the balance of (class) forces in struggle', in which the role of the state is to crystallize and mediate between the competing demands and interests that are voiced and articulated in society by representing them in its different institutional sites and by producing various interventions,

which are designed to respond to them (Jessop, 2002a, pp. 6, 37, 40, 70, 95). State interventions are thus embodied in particular policies, decisions, actions, pronouncements, ideological forms, and so forth. Yet, in keeping with liberal democratic ideology, although the state is in principle open to all interests and identities, it still exhibits a 'strategic selectivity', so that its accessibility and responsiveness to various demands reflects the dominant forces that have inscribed their interests and ambitions into the 'institutional materiality' of the state (Jessop, 1982; 1990). (In this regard, the state may be understood as having different degrees of 'relative autonomy' from conflicting interests and groups in society, thus enabling it to both facilitate the reproduction of capitalist relations, whilst remaining accessible to different, perhaps non-capitalist representations (cf., Miliband, 1969; Poulantzas, 1969; 1973; 1978)).

With respect to the practices of policymaking in modern capitalist societies, Jessop explores the ways in which various state forms and regimes exert a differential impact on the processes of policy formulation and implementation. For example, forms of representation associated with pluralism consist of a series of 'institutionalized channels of access to the state apparatuses for political forces representing interests and/or causes rooted in civil society (as opposed to function in the division of labour) and recognized as legitimate by relevant branches of the state', whereas corporatism involves forms of interest mediation that are grounded on functionally differentiated groups such as 'business' and 'labour' (Jessop, 1982, p. 230). Other systems of representation include clientalism, parliamentarism, *raison d'état*, and so on (Jessop, 1982, pp. 229–30). Any concrete political system will tend to exhibit various syntheses and combinations of these basic representational systems. This theory of the state arises from Jessop's more complex dialectical model of structure and agency, which he develops in part from Bhaskar's critical realism (Jessop, 1996).¹⁴

Critical evaluation

In general terms, Bhaskar's critical realism constitutes a welcome return to ontology in the social sciences, coupled with a relativization of epistemological and methodological concerns. More substantively, his approach stresses the role of structures in developing an alternative dialectical account of structure and agency, and his ideas have been used to develop more regional theories of the state, gender relations, policy-making, international relations, and so on (Byrne, 1998; Jessop, 2002a; 2002b; Joseph, 2002a; 2006; Wight, 2006; Woodiwiss, 1990). Yet despite

these advances, there are important remainders that are rendered visible from a poststructuralist perspective.

In the first place, whilst Bhaskar is right to stress the role of ontology, his particular understanding of the ontological dimension of social relations is restricted to an elaboration of the sorts of objects and mechanisms that make up the (social) world. Yet, as I suggested in the last chapter, the concept of ontology for poststructuralists is not reducible to an inventory of the kinds of things we find in the world. On the contrary, in addition to inquiring into *what* sorts of things exist, it is important to explore the fact *that* they exist and *how* they exist. And of capital importance in this regard is the fact that objects and subjects are marked by an 'essential instability', which problematizes a simple listing of their necessary intrinsic properties and causal capacities, whilst foregrounding their contingency, historicity, and fragility. Indeed, in terms of social and political analysis, this perspective highlights the *constructed* and *political* character of social objectivity, which in turn calls for the elaboration of concepts and logics that are commensurate with these ontological commitments (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, pp. 160–1). In short, then, we cannot sever beings and entities from the relational contexts in which they appear and from the particular interpretations that constitute their function and meaning for agents. In Bhaskar's account of structure and agency, by contrast, he clearly privileges the role of structures as a set of independent and external constraints on human action, which define for the latter a potential range of outcomes and strategies. But in so doing he runs the danger of paying insufficient attention to the necessary and complex connection between the empirical, phenomenological, and ontological levels of analysis, that is, the realm of lived experience and action, on the one hand, and the underlying structures and modes of being that make the former possible on the other.

Secondly, although Bhaskar's reformulation of structure and agency stresses various sorts of structure, and though we are given various examples of social and physical structures, the very concept of structure is rarely clarified. Social structures are usually mentioned alongside the reference to causal mechanisms, real objects endowed with certain properties and dispositions, as well as the powers and relations that causally govern events and outcomes. In fact, they are often synonymous with these entities. In one rendition of the approach, Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts argue that any complex entity has an intrinsic structure, or a particular articulation of different structures, which constitutes that object, thereby making it one sort of thing and not

another. Structure thus endows an entity with 'dispositions', 'capacities', and 'potentials', as well as 'abilities to act in certain ways' (Brown et al., 2002, p. 5). For example, a bicycle is composed of various structures – wheels, frame, saddle, and handlebars – which are combined together to form this particular sort of thing, thus furnishing it with the powers to facilitate transportation. This potentiality may then be exercised and actualized by persons who use the bicycle for certain purposes. In more concrete terms, social structures are often defined in Marxist terms, with recourse to notions like 'mode of production', 'relations of production', 'ideology', and so forth (e.g., Bhaskar, 1998, pp. 28, 56, 75, 81).

This conception of structure is not in itself necessarily problematic. There is a long tradition of thinking that equates structures with essences or forms. Indeed, in certain respects, this move can be helpful in clarifying certain objects and systems, thus enabling us to explain social practices and processes. However, poststructuralists are not content to reduce structures to essences or forms. Nor do they accept that structures are exhausted by their formal causal properties and their particular modes of historical constitution. Of course, this begs the key question as to whether or not more *can* be said about this vital category. Many poststructuralists respond to this question in the affirmative. More fully, at an abstract metaphysical level, they excavate the conditions of possibility of structures, as well as their conditions of impossibility. Or, to put this in Derrida's quasi-transcendental language, poststructuralists inquire into what they term the 'structurality of the structure' or the 'systematicity of the system' (Derrida, 1978; 1984, p. 2). In more concrete terms, they are also concerned to explore and characterize the concatenation of various sorts of social and natural structures, as well as different structures and forms in particular contexts and conjunctures, whilst seeking to find ways of connecting them at more concrete levels of investigation.

A related set of questions pertains to the concept of agency. As with other perspectives, much ink has been spilled about the topic of agency, and critical realists are no exception to the rule. The problem is vital because it impinges directly on the idea of social change: the contestation and alteration of social structures. Bhaskar's response to this question hinges on what he calls the 'transformational model of social activity', in which he stresses the importance of making a categorical distinction between human actions and social structures:

I want to distinguish sharply then between the genesis of human actions, lying in the reasons, intentions and plans of human beings,

on the one hand; and the structures governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities, on the other; and hence between the domains of the psychological and the social sciences. The problem of how people reproduce any particular society belongs to a linking science of social psychology.

(Bhaskar, 1989, pp. 79–80)

One of the advantages of Bhaskar's position, in his view, is that it retains the status of human agency, whilst contesting the genetic fallacy that suggests that all social structures and practices are the product of individual human agency. Yet, according to Bhaskar, this still enables us 'to see that necessity in social life operates in the last instance via the intentional activity of agents' (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 80).

Bhaskar's account of agency thus focusses attention on the reproduction, recreation and transformation of social relations and forms, rather than their creation or production *ab initio* (see Fleetwood, 2001; 2002, p. 67). But there are still worries about this reformulation. For one thing, there are queries about the role of collective agency in bringing about change in Bhaskar's model, as he tends to focus almost exclusively on individual intentions and actions (cf., Joseph, 2002b, pp. 32–3). Indeed, his account of human agency seems to dwell solely on individual consciousness, which runs the risk of a certain psychologism that reduces human agency and subjectivity to individual beliefs and desires. Human actions and practices are thus reduced to psychological mechanisms and dispositions. In the same breath, Bhaskar does not distinguish between human agency and human subjectivity, in which he tends to conflate the two notions, and his concern with agency tends to focus exclusively on human agency to the detriment of other forms of agency.

The 'transformational model of social activity' is also vital for Bhaskar's response to the *relationship* between structure and agency and thus to his account of social change. How and under what conditions does change take place? Part of Bhaskar's response to this question also centres on the transformative capacity of social agents in opposing relations of domination and exploitation in the name of freedom and emancipation (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 70). In this model, agents use their available scientific knowledge and their reflexive capacities to make sense of their situations, to become aware of their real interests, and to formulate appropriate strategies to achieve their goals. Scientific practices associated with what he calls the 'emancipatory' or 'normative' social sciences (such as critical realism) are thus internally connected to

the 'transformative praxis' of 'self-emancipating agents' (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 178; 1991, p. 72). Yet it is evident that more can be said about the precise theoretical and empirical conditions under which transformative practices become possible, as well as the political constraints and practices for its achievement. Such questions require further conceptual elaboration and theory building, which will be elaborated in Chapter 5.

At the same time, there are legitimate and growing concerns about the idea of fully grounded and indubitable science of society and politics, which can furnish the basis for critique, normative evaluation, and emancipation. In the spirit of critical theory, though in a very different style, Bhaskar's critical realism contests and reinscribes the dominant perspectives on these issues. In his challenge both to positivists, who oppose fact and value, and theoreticists, who split abstract theory and social practice, he develops a practice of 'explanatory critique' in the human sciences that is explicitly orientated toward 'human emancipation' (Bhaskar, 1989, pp. 102, 186). Indeed, in his words, a suitably conceived and constructed social science makes the connection between certain sorts of explanatory theory and the practices of critique and evaluation 'mandatory' (Bhaskar, 1989, pp. 101, 105). Thus, while Bhaskar does not posit an absolute identity between explanation and critique, he argues that if certain theories (such as those informed by the philosophy of critical realism) can identify false (i.e., ideological) beliefs by providing causal explanations of the sources of those beliefs, then we can and must move immediately to a negative evaluation of the source of unbelief, as well as a positive evaluation of social action aimed at the latter's challenge and removal (Bhaskar, 1989, pp. 101–5). In short, well-founded explanatory theory has intrinsic implications for critique and thus for human emancipation.

Conclusion

The four perspectives discussed in this chapter yield four distinct accounts of structure and agency. But though these perspectives contribute important theoretical resources to our understanding of this vital problem in social and political theory, each is marked by difficulties that have been highlighted in my critical evaluations. A key 'deficiency' that runs through all these perspectives arises from the presumption that this perennial problem in social and political theory can be resolved in a theoretical and rational way. One dimension of the conceit residing in this theoreticist desire is that questions about social change, human agency, and the constraints impinging (and facilitating)

social action can be conceptualized and answered in a determinate way without a consideration of the contextual and empirical circumstances within which they arise. But the deficiency is not just empirical or contextual. As I shall argue in Chapter 5, and then through an analysis of the problems of power, domination, and hegemony, the problem of structure and agency does not admit of theoretical resolution at all, because it is an issue that resides in social relations themselves. It is to this clarification and elucidation that I now turn.